DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 541 HE 035 465

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TITLE	Curriculum Reform in the Professions: Preparing Students for a Changing World. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-HE-2002-08
PUB DATE	2002-00-00
NOTE	4p.; Based on the ASHE-ERIC report of the same title, published by Jossey-Bass Publishers, A John-Wiley Company (see HE 035 434). Contains small print.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0036
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183. Tel: 800-956-7739 (Toll Free).
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Accounting; Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; Higher Education; Learning; *Nursing Education; *Professional Education; Student Evaluation; *Teacher Education
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest focuses on the major changes that college and university faculty have designed in their undergraduate professional education programs in three areas: accounting, nursing, and teacher education. Reforms in each of these programs are reviewed. The changes seen in these three professional education programs offer lessons for faculty in many different disciplines. Several thematic elements can be identified from this review of curriculum reform. Many reforms require students to be engaged actively in their studies, and students often work on real-world issues or problems. Problems are usually open-ended with no single correct answer, and in all three fields assessments of student learning are being used to gauge whether students are mastering the intended learning outcomes. (Contains 21 references.) (SLD)

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ED 470 541

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Curriculum Reform in the Professions: Preparing Students for a Changing World

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EDO-HE-2002-08

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ERIC-HE Digest Series
The George Washington University
EDO-HE-2002-08
U.S. Department of Education

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By Dr. Elizabeth A. Jones

Introduction

Ideally, an undergraduate education should provide students with the necessary skills, attitudes, and values that are critical to navigate the dynamic complexities of the business world. Employers are searching for graduates with strong abilities in problem solving, teamwork, communications, and leadership (Carnevale, 2000; Rao and Sylvester, 2000; Oblinger and Verville, 1998; Miles, 1994). Although most employees enter new positions with adequate technical skills, it is the process skills—especially communications and problem solving— that count toward successful job performance over time, and it is these skills that are most often absent (College Placement Council, 1994).

Concerns about the educational quality of professional preparation programs have generated fairly specific sets of recommendations about the interventions or reforms necessary to strengthen undergraduate education. While some reports are very critical, others suggest that the gap exists between the ideal outcomes and actual performance because there has been considerable "upskilling" across sectors of different professional fields (Business Higher Education Forum, 1997; Carnevale, Gainer, and Meltzer, 1990).

There has been very little recent synthesis and analysis of the progress that has been made within the United States in response to these criticisms. The ASHE-ERIC Report upon which this Digest is based focuses on the major changes that college and university faculty have designed in their undergraduate professional education programs in three areas: accounting, nursing, and teacher education. Each of these areas represents a different emphasis. Accounting is characterized as an enterprising field, nursing as a helping profession, and education as an informing profession (Stark, Lowther, and Hagerty, 1986). Examples of curriculum reforms in each of these professional preparation areas are highlighted.

Accounting Program Reform

Accounting curricula have been criticized as being too narrow. Students have been exposed to a rule-based model in which they were expected to memorize content in order to prepare for tests and the certifying public accountancy exam. Textbooks did not help students to develop the ability-to-learn skills, nor did students have sufficient contact with businesses, which left them unprepared for the ambiguities that exist in businesses (Albrecht and Sack, 2000, p. 45; Needles and Powers, 1990).

Several reports calling for reform in accounting programs (for example, Albrecht and Sack, 2000; Big Eight Accounting Firms, 1989; Bedford, 1986) stressed the importance of preparing accountants for broadened functions that include the identification and development of knowledge for a wide variety of decisions. In addition, there has been a uniform call to emphasize communication, intellectual, and interpersonal skills. The Accounting Education Change Commission and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education have often been key supporters of these curriculum innovations.

Nursing Program Reform

Nurses in health care settings need to be effective critical thinkers as they strive to address multiple demands in changing environments. Rapid advances in science and technology, the expanding body of knowledge, and the dynamic health care delivery system require practitioners to think critically (Jacobs, Ott, Sullivan, Ulrich, and Short, 1997). A crucial criterion set forth by the National League for Nursing as one standard for measuring the quality of an educational program is the strength of the critical thinking skills of its graduates (Poirrier, 1997).

The Pew Health Professions Commission, in its final report in 1998, recommended that curricula be redesigned to ensure that students acquire broad general education competences, including "critical thinking and clinical judgment skills, effective organizational and team work skills, service orientation, cost awareness, accountability of clinical outcomes and quality of care, and a commitment to continual learning and development" (Bellack and O'Neil, 2000, p.16).

Some nursing programs have developed in-depth competency statements that are intended to define the knowledge, skills, and abilities of nursing students. For example, the Mississippi Council of Deans and Directors of Schools of Nursing developed a model that articulated their vision of nursing for students in their own state (Eichelberger and Hewlett, 1999).

Other nursing faculty, for example, at the University of Memphis, moved from a traditional program to a competency-based curriculum (Luttrell, Lenburg, Scherubel, Jacob, and Koch, 1999). Statements of performance-based abilities necessary for contemporary practice were used to guide the design of all learning experiences and as the basis for assessing student learning (Luttrell, et al, 1999, p. 135-136).

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Problem-based learning (PBL) has also been implemented in selected undergraduate programs within the United States (Duch, Groh, and Allen, 2001, p.6). The PBL approach was developed as a way to help students gain a stronger understanding of concepts through the use of practical applications. Each decision problem required students to learn new concepts in order to solve the problem.

Teacher Education Program Reform

A common criticism of teacher education programs has been that they lack rigorous course work and intellectual challenge (Romanowski and Oldenski, 1998). There are recurring issues associated with relevance of course work and its redundancy as well as lack of critical thinking abilities, and weak role models in both college faculty members and classroom teachers (Applegate and Shaklee, 1992). Some employers believe new graduates who enter the teaching profession are not prepared with the practical knowledge and skills that are needed to perform effectively in their new roles. Critics have argued that theory is separated from practice and thus deep learning about complex issues or problems in the real world are neglected. Others have argued that courses in teacher education programs have become fragmented and often have very little relationship with one another (Tom, 1997).

Recently, there has been major reform in teacher education programs. In particular, many schools of education have created programs that extend beyond the traditional four-year degree program and include strong relationships with local schools (Darling-Hammond, 1999). These revised programs require students to receive a strong disciplinary background and extensive study of teaching and learning that is integrated with intensive clinical training in schools.

Some colleges offer one-or two-year graduate programs while others offer a five-year model that allows for an extended preparation program for prospective students who are undergraduates pursuing the teacher education major. The fifth year of these teacher education programs helps undergraduates focus their last year solely on preparing to teach and gaining experience in school-based internships connected to coursework on teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Many of these programs are collaborating with local school districts to create professional development schools that plan the students' clinical preparation. Similar to teaching hospitals in medicine, these schools provide sites for "state-of-the-art practice that also train new professionals, extend the professional development of veteran teachers and sponsor collaborative research and inquiry" (Darling-Hammond, 1999, p. 31).

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future assessed several innovative teacher education programs and found that they have many features in common, including: explicit and specific standards constituting what teachers should know and be able to do in order to teach their subject matter to diverse groups of students (Darling-Hammond, 1999, p.32); a systematic program of study grounded in substantive knowledge and taught in the context of practice; extensive use of problem-based learning methods including case studies, research on teaching issues, performance assessments, and portfolio evaluation (Darling-Hammond, 1999); intensively supervised, extended clinical experiences (typically at least 30 weeks) that were designed to support what students learned in their courses; and partnerships with local schools that "support both the development of common knowledge and shared beliefs among school- and university-based faculty" (Darling-Hammond, 1999, p.32).

Conclusion

These changes offer lessons for faculty in many different disciplines, especially faculty who work with students in various professional fields. From a review of these curriculum reforms, several common thematic elements can be identified: Many reforms require students to be actively engaged in their studies, students often work on real world issues or problems, problems are usually open-ended with no single correct answer, and assessments of student learning are used to gauge whether students are mastering the intended learning outcomes.

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